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Too much honesty/humility

**Leader Honesty/Humility and Subordinate Organizational Citizenship Behavior:
A Case of Too Much of a Good Thing?**

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Abstract

Purpose – On the basis of theories of social cognition and moral identity and the meta-theoretical principle of “too-much-of-a-good-thing”, the purpose of this study is to develop and test a model that explains when and why leader honesty/humility promotes subordinate organizational citizenship behavior directed at individuals (OCBI) as mediated through subordinate moral identity centrality.

Design/methodology/approach – In this field study, with online surveys, multi-source data were collected from 218 United States Air Force officers and their subordinates. Data were analyzed with MEDCURVE SPSS macro tools.

Findings – A nonlinear indirect effect of leader honesty/humility on subordinate OCBI through subordinate moral identity centrality was found. This conditional indirect effect occurred through a curvilinear (inverted U-shape) relationship between leader honesty/humility and subordinate moral identity centrality, and a positive linear relationship between subordinate moral identity centrality and OCBI.

Research limitations/implications – Cross-sectional data were collected. Future research might replicate findings using experimental and longitudinal designs.

Practical implications – Recruiting and selecting leaders who possess a moderate level of honesty/humility may serve as the first step in producing prosocial behavior during social interactions with subordinates.

Originality/value – This study extends the literature on character and leadership by applying the “too-much-of-a-good-thing” principle to empirically test the complex nature of the relationship between leader honesty/humility and subordinate OCBI as mediated through subordinate moral identity centrality.

Keywords – Leadership, Ethics, Positive Psychology, Social Identity

Leader Honesty/Humility and Subordinate Organizational Citizenship Behavior: A Case of Too Much of a Good Thing?

Introduction

Given occurrences of ethical scandals in organizations and the increasing importance of ethics and morality in leadership processes aimed at helping self and others to flourish (Brown and Treviño, 2006), a growing body of literature has demonstrated the influence of leader character strengths on leader and subordinate outcomes such as life satisfaction and engagement (Brdar and Kashdan, 2010), job performance (Palanski and Yammarino, 2011), executive and middle manager performance (Sosik et al., 2012), voice behavior (Liborius, 2014), and organizational citizenship behavior (Sosik et al., 2019). Although this stream of research on leader character strengths has enhanced our understanding of various outcomes for both leaders and subordinates, little is known about the motivational mechanisms that explain *how and when* subordinates become influenced to do good for others by following their leader's example of good character.

Communicating and exhibiting good character to others has long been an important focus for both philosophers and researchers because character is not formed on its own but requires observations of moral/social norms and modeling of virtuous conduct from others (Aristotle, 1999; Crossan et al., 2013). Park and Peterson (2006) proposed that the most important consequence of good character may be its effects on other people. Wright and Goodstein (2007) argued that leaders communicate and demonstrate their character through interpersonal relationships and social interactions with their subordinates. Research on moral identity recognizes that self-conceptions organized around a set of moral traits (e.g., honesty, humility) can motivate prosocial behavior of self and others (Aquino and Reed, 2002). Despite these conceptual advances, few empirical studies test ways in which leader character influences subordinates' motivation to emulate their leader by doing good for others.

Moreover, previous work regarding the influence of leader character strengths on self and others assumes that “the more developed any strength is, the better people are” (Schwartz and Sharpe, 2006, p. 380). However, scholars have recently questioned this “more is better” assumption and recognized that not only can a deficiency of character strengths have negative effects, but an excess also can be potentially harmful (Crossan et al., 2013; Grant and Schwartz, 2011). The notion that too much good character can have negative effects on self and others is based on Aristotle’s (1999) “virtuous mean” concept which represents an ideal point of balance between two extremes, neither too high nor too low, but rather *character strengths exercised in moderation*. This point of virtue reflects practical wisdom and insight to one’s ability to find the balance between two extremes, or to minimize harm and maximize good (Aristotle, 1999).

This Aristotelian viewpoint may be explained by the “too-much-of-a-good-thing” (TMGT) meta-theoretical principle manifested in nonmonotonic inverted-U-shaped effects, whereby positive effects gradually reach inflection points at which their effects turn negative (Pierce and Aguinis, 2013). In a similar vein, Crossan et al. (2013) suggested that individuals have the capacity to build character strengths around the virtuous mean if they avoid vices of both *deficiency* and *excess*. While empirical research examining the TMGT effect of character strengths has been sparse, some character strengths (e.g., honesty and humility) have attracted the attention of scholars. For example, Palanski and Yammarino (2011) discussed the possibility of negative outcomes of excessive leader integrity, such as investment of too much time and energy by leaders, and Grant and Schwartz (2011) identified integrity (i.e., honesty) as a plausible candidate for the TMGT effect. Yet, no study empirically tested it even though it is imperative to examine when and how the deficiency or excess of such character strengths possibly transform what is customarily considered to be a virtue into a vice.

The purpose of this study is twofold. First, drawing upon theories of social cognition and moral identity (Aquino and Reed, 2002), this study aims to provide a complete understanding of the dynamics of character-based leader-subordinate interactions by testing the role of leader honesty/humility in increasing the centrality of morality to subordinates' self-concept. Second, this study aims to extend the literature on character and leadership by applying the TMGT principle to test the nature of the relationship between leader honesty/humility and subordinate organizational citizenship behavior directed at individuals (OCBI) as mediated through subordinate moral identity centrality. Examining the nonlinear indirect effect enhances the understanding of the boundary conditions for this leader character strength, regarding when and why it prompts subordinates to engage in prosocial behavior. To our knowledge, the extant literature on character and leadership has remained relatively silent on these topics. Thus, we aim to answer repeated calls by scholars (Crossan et al., 2013; Sosik and Cameron, 2010) in this realm to support the theoretical foundation of the character and leadership literature. By doing so, we also answer the call for a focus on subordinates' moral identity to advance our understanding of leadership processes and outcomes by moving beyond traditional leader-centric views (Zhu et al., 2016).

In sum, our study investigates the nonmonotonic inverted U-shaped relationship between leader honesty/humility and subordinate moral identity centrality, defining a boundary condition of *when* leader honesty/humility promotes OCBI in subordinates. Further, our study explicates the role of subordinate moral identity centrality as a mechanism of the relationship between leader honesty/humility and subordinate OCBI, explaining *why* the proposed relationship occurs.

Theory and hypotheses

The present study is grounded in social cognitive theory of moral thought and action (Bandura, 1991) which proposes that individuals learn about moral obligations, duties, and

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prosocial values from the observed or attributed traits and behaviors of influential others. If such learnings are deemed important by individuals, the observed or attributed traits become internalized into aspects of their moral self-concept which defines important facets of who they are as a person. Self-concepts are comprised of values, goals, and identities that highlight what is most important to groups or societies and provide individuals with meaning and motivation (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Because individuals strive to maintain consistency between their espoused self-conceptions and enacted behaviors as a display of their “true identity” or “real self” (Shamir, 1991, p. 413), they are motivated to demonstrate those aspects of the self that are central to their identity in order to be authentic. Consistent with social cognitive theory, prosocial behavior allows for the discharge of one’s moral obligations through such forms of self-expression.

Leader honesty/humility are among the attractive traits deemed important by subordinates for the modeling of morals and ethics (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Honesty/humility is defined as “the tendency to be fair and genuine in dealing with others, in the sense of cooperating with others even when one might exploit them without suffering retaliation” (Ashton and Lee, 2007, p. 156). Although the literature has considered these terms interchangeably with varying meanings and conceptualizations, recent research has identified the combination of honesty and humility as a single personality trait that measures aspects of these character strengths (i.e., sincerity, fairness, greed avoidance, and modesty) with the HEXACO personality inventory (Ashton et al., 2014). Previous studies have consistently found it to have substantive value in predicting ethical behaviors (Sosik et. al., 2019), prosocial behaviors (Cohen et al., 2014), and in preventing counterproductive work behaviors (Lee et al., 2005). Therefore, we adopt the honesty/humility construct in our study for the theoretical discussion and hypotheses to contribute to the existing literature.

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Serving as the ethical motivation mechanism in our model, moral identity is defined as “a self-conception organized around a set of moral traits” (Aquino and Reed, 2002, p. 1424). The cognitive aspect of moral identity reflects the internalization of moral traits that are central or important to the self-concept, which is called *moral identity centrality* (Aquino et al., 2009). The greater the moral identity centrality, the higher its activation potential and the stronger its ability to affect information processing and ultimately prompt moral behavior, such as OCBI (Aquino et al., 2009). OCBI reflects extra-role behaviors that one performs to assist colleagues at work (Williams and Anderson, 1991) and demonstrates for colleagues the kinds of prosocial behaviors that express their moral identity centrality by following the potential role models’ (e.g., leader) exemplification of moral traits (Aquino and Reed, 2002).

Honesty/Humility and moral identity centrality

Bandura (1991) explained how individuals learn about social and moral norms from important role models regarding who to be (traits), how to view oneself (self-concept), and how to act (behavior). The basic tenet of social cognitive theory is consistent with work on ethical leadership that views honesty/humility as attractive traits for leaders and subordinates to possess because it adds to one’s credibility and likeability (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Building upon this tenet and social identity theory (Ashforth and Mael, 1989), Shao et al. (2008) proposed that individuals (e.g., subordinates) form their moral identity through social interactions, participation in moral actions, and the community/institutional context.

By recognizing the moral trait of honesty/humility in their leaders through social interactions and the ethical culture created by the leaders, subordinates learn the importance of this trait as a character strength that is essential to the formation and sustenance of a strong moral identity (Zhu et al., 2016). Furthermore, leaders may indirectly influence subordinates’ moral identity by establishing ethical norms and cultures that value and reward honesty/humility whereby subordinates’ moral identity becomes salient (Brown and Treviño,

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2006). Consistent with these theoretical arguments, Cohen et al. (2014) reported positive correlations between honesty/humility and moral identity centrality in two longitudinal diary studies and a survey study.

Although these arguments and results suggest a positive monotonic linear relationship between leader honesty/humility and subordinate moral identity centrality, recent theoretical (Grant and Schwartz, 2011; Pierce and Aguinis, 2013) and empirical research (Stouten et al., 2013) suggests that the generally-accepted assumption of such a monotonic linear relationship should be challenged. Specifically, an optimal level of influence of leader honesty/humility on subordinate moral identity centrality may not be achieved when leader honesty/humility is either low (i.e., deficient) or too high (i.e., excessive). In these conditions, subordinates are unlikely to identify with and/or associate with such leaders, thereby impeding moral social learning processes from occurring. Such reasoning suggests that the relation between leader honesty/humility and subordinate moral identity centrality would not be linear but curvilinear.

In line with social cognitive theory of moral thought and action (Bandura, 1991), when leader honesty/humility is low, subordinates are likely to perceive the leader as not worthy as a moral role model. In contrast, when leader honesty/humility is too high, it may be impossible for the leader to access or influence the subordinates' moral self-schema for two reasons. First, subordinates may perceive such leaders as self-righteous or view them as impossible to live up to the example set by the leader because their moral standards are too high. Excessive honesty/humility may be perceived as weakness or “wimpy” – traits typically *not* associated with prototypical leaders. Preliminary evidence of detrimental effects of such excessive traits is found in curvilinear relations between ethical leadership and OCB reported by Stouten et al. (2013, p. 692), who concluded that subordinates perceive leaders who are either highly or lowly ethical as “less attractive role models because they feel morally

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reproached by the leader.” Second, subordinates may believe such leaders are behaving in an inauthentic way and are faking their exemplary character, and when it comes to good character, most people believe that “nobody’s perfect” (Sosik and Cameron, 2010, p. 263). In either case, subordinates are unlikely to identify with such leaders, thereby impairing social learning processes and role modeling of appropriate moral standards suitable for enhancing moral identity centrality.

Such reasoning is consistent with Aristotle’s (1999) virtuous mean perspective and research (e.g., Crossan et al., 2013) which proposes that each of the character strengths in the Virtues in Action (VIA) classification (Peterson and Seligman, 2004) can be described in terms of low (deficient), medium (virtuous mean), and too high (excessive) levels. When honesty/humility is deficient, its virtue may be transformed into a vice reflecting inauthenticity and boastfulness, whereas when honesty/humility is excessive, its virtue becomes the vice of self-righteousness and self-deprecation (Crossan et al., 2013). It is likely that these leader vices negatively affect subordinates’ identification with the leader (Shamir, 1991). Thus, we posit that leader honesty/humility has a gradually increasing relationship with subordinate moral identity centrality up to an optimal inflection point (i.e., a moderate level of honesty/humility), after which increased levels of honesty/humility gradually decrease moral identity centrality.

H1. There is a curvilinear (inverted U-shaped) relationship between leader honesty/humility and subordinate moral identity centrality.

Moral identity centrality and OCBI

Research on moral identity generally supports the notion that possessing an identity that highly values ethics and morality supports the opportunity to present one’s moral characteristics to others through one’s prosocial behavior (Shao et al., 2008). Winterich et al. (2013) reported a positive relationship between moral identity centrality and volunteering of

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time to help others. In addition, Aquino et al. (2009) demonstrated that the greater the degree to which a moral identity was central to an individual's self-concept, the greater the extent s/he would engage in cooperative behavior.

Moral identity enables people to view themselves as being ethical, caring, compassionate, fair, generous, helpful, honest and kind, and prompts a desire to demonstrate these self-images to others (Aquino and Reed, 2002). People with high levels of moral identity possess a moral self-schema that can be more cognitively and emotionally accessible and activated (Lapsley and Lasky, 2001), which prompts prosocial behaviors. As such, moral identity centrality can play important roles in ethical decision making and extra-role behaviors of employees (Shao et al., 2008). Employees with higher levels of moral identity centrality have been shown to avoid unethical behaviors, and act ethically and engage in the normatively appropriate prosocial behaviors, such as OCBI (Zhu et al., 2011).

Based on Bandura's (1991) social cognitive theory of moral thought and action, we argue that subordinates with high levels of moral identity centrality are characterized by high moral self-regulation, including moral motivation and moral self-sanctioning. Moral self-sanctioning may prompt subordinates to feel guilty for not acting pro-socially. As such, subordinates are likely to recognize and revisit their moral objectives and social norms continuously, and thus act pro-socially by displaying OCBI. Based on this theorizing and evidence and OCBI's conceptualization as a type of prosocial behavior (Williams and Anderson, 1991), we propose a positive association of subordinates' moral identity centrality with their OCBI.

H2. There is a positive relationship between subordinate moral identity centrality and OCBI.

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Honesty/Humility, moral identity centrality, and OCBI

While honesty/humility has been conceptually linked with OCBI, this relationship has received little empirical research attention by scholars (Lee et al., 2019). Organ (1988) identified three dimensions of OCBI, namely, altruism, conscience, and courtesy. Marcus et al. (2007) pointed out that honesty/humility predicts a strong moral conscience that induces prosocial and ethical behaviors toward others (Oh et al., 2014) and prompts a moral obligation to help (altruism) and respect others even when one can be exploited by them (courtesy) (Lee et al., 2019). Ashton and Lee (2007) suggested that the honesty/humility construct evokes reciprocal altruism as a motive for prosocial behavior of those observing the trait in a significant other.

When modeling honesty/humility for subordinates at a moderate level of honesty/humility (neither deficient nor excessive), leaders appear fair and genuine when dealing with subordinates. Upon recognizing these aspects of good character, subordinates may identify with the leader as a role model and internalize honesty/humility into their moral identity. Such internalization is based on the principle that subordinates are likely to enact what the leader demonstrates by his/her traits (Schneider et al., 2005). Because individuals are self-expressive of their identities (Shamir, 1991) and honesty/humility evokes reciprocal altruism (Ashton and Lee, 2007), subordinates are likely to display OCBI emulating such traits that help or provide benefits to others. Such “paying it forward” prosocial behavior is satisfying because it reflects a correspondence with the leader’s moral traits, a consistency with one’s own moral identity, and a sense of authenticity (Aquino and Reed, 2002; Shamir, 1991). Based on the research summarized above and arguments proffered to develop *H1* and *H2*, we posit a nonlinear, conditional indirect effect at different levels of leader honesty/humility.

H3. Leader honesty/humility has a gradually increasing relationship with subordinate moral identity centrality up to an optimal level of honesty/humility, which in turn is positively related to subordinate OCBI, producing a positive indirect effect through increased subordinate moral identity centrality. Leader honesty/humility has a gradually diminishing relationship with subordinate moral identity centrality after the optimal inflection point, leading to a negative indirect effect of leader honesty/humility on subordinate OCBI through decreased subordinate moral identity centrality.

Method

Sample and procedure

To test the hypothesized model of the present study, we collected data from United States Air Force (USAF) Captains, who attended a five-week leadership course, and their subordinates. The data come from a large study of leadership processes and outcomes conducted in the USAF which has also produced Sosik et al. (2019). Participation for this online survey data collection was voluntary, and we collected the survey data from multiple sources to assess the predictor and outcome variables separately and to minimize potential common source bias effects (Podsakoff et al., 2003).

We initially sent the survey link jointly created by an online surveying platform to 1,570 leaders' and their 1,269 subordinates' emails. Subordinates were identified by referencing chain of command records from the USAF and by asking focal leaders to identify subordinates willing to participate in our study. A total of 1,205 completed surveys were returned from leaders and their subordinates for a response rate of 42.4%. Of this total, 743 leaders responded about their own levels of honesty/humility and 462 subordinates responded about their own levels of moral identity centrality and OCBI. After eliminating the cases with unmatched leader-subordinate sets, a total of 218 unique one-to-one matched sets of leader

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and subordinate ratings were used for hypothesis testing of our research model. About 76.1% of the officers had only one subordinate's report, and we randomly selected a subordinate's rating in the cases of multiple ratings per leader to minimize selection bias.

Of the final 218 matched reports, 159 leaders (72.9%) were male and 59 leaders (27.1%) were female. Ranging from 25 to 52 in years, the average age of the leaders was 31.23 ($SD = 4.83$). Of these leaders, 44.5% had a bachelor's degree while 55.5% had a master's degree. Forty percent of leaders worked in operations, 17% in logistics and support, 9% in acquisitions, 22% in medical and professional services, 2% in special investigations, and 10% in other areas. With respect to the subordinates, 72% were male and 28% were female; 4.6% graduated from high school; 30.7% had an associate's degree; 45.9% had a bachelor's degree while 18.8% had a master's degree.

Measures

To allay concern for common rater bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003), leaders' honesty/humility was self-rated by the leaders, whereas moral identity centrality, OCBI, and a set of control variables were assessed with subordinates' own ratings. Unless otherwise noted, all items for the measures were rated based on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). To assess the focal leaders' *honesty/humility*, we adopted seven facet-level items related to sincerity, greed-avoidance, and modesty dimensions from the HEXACO-60 assessment of personality dimensions (Ashton and Lee, 2009)¹. Sample items read, "I wouldn't pretend to like someone just to get that person to do favors for me" (sincerity), "Having a lot of money is not especially important to me" (greed-avoidance), and "I want people to know that I am an important person of high status (reversed item)" (modesty) ($\alpha = .76$). Following Aquino et al. (2009), we measured

¹ Three items of the fairness facet of the original honesty/humility scale were dropped in our survey, as the participating leaders in the present study are strongly abided by the USAF honor code and customarily expected to practice high levels of integrity.

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subordinates' *moral identity centrality* using five items from the internalization subscale of Aquino and Reed's (2002) moral identity scale. Subordinates were first asked to consider several characteristics that might describe them (i.e., caring, compassionate, fair, friendly, generous, helpful, hardworking, honest, and kind). Then they rated the extent to which the provided characteristics describe them using five specific items. A sample item reads, "Being someone who has these characteristics is an important part of who I am" ($\alpha = .87$). We measured subordinates' *OCBI*, by using seven items from William and Anderson (1991). A sample item reads "Go out of my way to help new employees" ($\alpha = .85$).

Control variables. We included subordinates' demographics of age, gender, education, and self-ratings of their own honesty/humility ($\alpha = .64$), as a set of control variables in our research model. By using Reynolds' (1982) 13-item short form of the Marlow-Crowne Social Desirability Scale (responses rated as either 1: *True* or 2: *False*), we also controlled for the effect of subordinates' *socially desirable responding* (SDR). A sample item reads, "I have never deliberately said something that hurt someone's feelings" ($\alpha = .64$).

Results

Preliminary analyses

Measurement model. We conducted a set of confirmatory factor analyses (CFAs) to further address the issues of common method variance and discriminant validity of study measures. A series of chi-square difference tests revealed that the three-factor model fit the data significantly better than all other alternative models (honesty/humility, moral identity centrality, OCBI: $\chi^2 (df) = 296.42 (149)$, CFI = .90, RMSEA = .07, SRMR = .07).² Given that the rating source of subordinate moral identity centrality and OCBI is common, we estimated how much variance in each item measure of the two variables was explained by subordinate SDR, following the single-method-scale-score approach (Podsakoff et al., 2003). We found

² Details of the results of measurement model comparisons are available upon request from the first author.

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that the squared factor loading of each indicator on the SDR was .005 on average ($\chi^2(df) = 161.73(64)$, CFI = .92, RMSEA = .08, SRMR = .06). This result indicates that subordinate SDR as a potential source of common rater variance explained only 0.50% of variance of each item measure of subordinates' moral identity centrality and OCBI. These results support the discriminant validity of measures used in the present study and reduce the concern for common source variance.

Descriptive statistics. Table 1 presents the means and standard deviations of all the variables used in the present study. Reliabilities (i.e., Cronbach's alpha) of the latent constructs as well as the correlations among the variables are also provided.

Insert Table 1 about here

Hypothesis tests

To test our hypotheses, we followed Hayes and Preacher's (2010) procedure and used the MEDCURVE SPSS macro to test a simple mediation model where the constituent path is nonlinear. In general, when a mediator (M) is a linear function of a predictor (X) ($X \rightarrow M$ path = a) and an outcome (Y) is a linear function of M ($M \rightarrow Y$ path = b), then the indirect effect of X on Y through M " ab " is constant regardless of the levels of X and M . In this case, it is unnecessary to quantify the indirect effect of X on Y through M on specific values of the predictor X or the mediator M . However, if X is nonlinearly related to M , M is nonlinearly associated with Y , or both, the indirect effect of X on Y through M is not constant but conditional and varying at different levels of X , M or both. In this case, the conditional indirect effect on specific values of X , M or both is called *instantaneous indirect effect* of X on Y through M , and it quantifies the changes of Y through M , as X , M or both are changing (see Hayes and Preacher, 2010 for more computational details).

Table 2 presents the overall results. First, to test *H1*, subordinate moral identity centrality was regressed on leader honesty/humility and the squared term of leader honesty/humility (computed squared term on centered score for leader honesty/humility), along with control variables including subordinates' age, gender, education level, honesty/humility, and socially desirable responding. As shown in the Table 2 and Figure 1, the estimate of squared term for leader honesty/humility was negative and significant ($b = -.17$, $SE = .06$, $t = -2.75$, $p < .01$; $\Delta R^2 = .03$, $p < .01$), suggesting that there is an inverted U-shaped curvilinear relationship between leader honesty/humility and subordinate moral identity centrality. This result supports *H1*.

Insert Table 2 and Figure 1 about here

Second, *H2* posits a positive linear relationship between subordinate moral identity centrality and OCBI. As shown in the model of OCBI in Table 2, the effect of subordinate moral identity centrality on OCBI was positive and significant ($b = .32$, $SE = .06$, $t = 5.70$, $p < .01$), thus supporting *H2*.

H3 predicted a conditional indirect effect of leader honesty/humility on subordinate OCBI through subordinate moral identity centrality. Specifically, leader honesty/humility has a positive indirect effect on subordinate OCBI through increased levels of subordinate moral identity centrality up to an optimal level of honesty/humility. After the optimal point, however, leader honesty/humility has a negative indirect effect on subordinate OCBI through decreased levels of subordinate moral identity centrality. To assess this conditional effect, we computed the instantaneous indirect effect for three representative values of leader honesty/humility (i.e., mean and 1SD above and below the mean).

As shown at the bottom of Table 2, when leader honesty/humility is low, the instantaneous indirect effect is positive and significant (indirect effect = .07, $SE = .03$, 95% CI

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[.01, .13]). Contrarily, the instantaneous indirect effect is negative and significant (indirect effect = $-.07$, $SE = .04$, 95% CI [$-.15$, $-.01$]), when leader honesty/humility is high. This result indicates that an increase in honesty/humility among leaders whose level of honesty/humility is already high (i.e., excessive) would lead to a decrease in subordinate OCBI through a decrease in subordinate moral identity centrality. Specifically, the inflection point of the hypothesized curve ($X_{\text{Inflection}} = 3.65$) occurs at the point almost identical to the mean value of leader honesty/humility ($X_{\text{Mean}} = 3.66$), suggesting that the negative leader honesty/humility-subordinate moral identity centrality relationship after the inflection point would apply to 50.8% of the population. Taken together, these results support *H3*.

Discussion

On the basis of the TMGT meta-theoretical principle (Pierce and Aguinis, 2013) and theory of the virtuous mean in character development (Crossan et al., 2013), we found an indirect effect that occurred through a curvilinear (inverted U-shape) relationship between leader honesty/humility and subordinate moral identity centrality, and a positive linear relationship between subordinate moral identity centrality and OCBI. Given the curvilinear relationship, the indirect effect is conditional and instantaneous at different levels of leader honesty/humility.

Theoretical implications

The most important contribution of the present study is that it provided initial empirical support for prior claims that character strengths should be exercised in moderation and that both deficiencies *and* excesses of character strengths such as leader honesty/humility can have detrimental influences on not only the self, but also others (Grant and Schwartz, 2011). Aristotle (1999) suggested that predictors of character that he called “actions” or “passions” can be taken too far and lead to negative outcomes unless they are exercised in moderation, whereas “things good in themselves” should always lead to positive outcomes.

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While previous empirical studies heavily relied on the assumption that higher levels of character strengths produce more desirable outcomes, the present study explicates this literature by confirming these philosophers' and researchers' assertion that some character strengths should be manifested in moderation to yield the greatest benefits to self and others. Hence, our study contributes to the character and leadership literature by enriching its theoretical foundation.

Our study results indicated that subordinates' moral identity centrality gradually increased until leader honesty/humility reached an optimal inflection point and gradually diminished thereafter, which suggests that honesty/humility may be either an action or passion and *not* things always good in themselves. This result is also consistent with arguments made by Crossan et al. (2013), Grant and Schwartz (2011), and Palanski and Yammarino (2011) regarding honesty/humility that too much of these strengths can be problematic.

We also found that subordinates' moral identity centrality mediated the positive relationship between leader honesty/humility and subordinates' OCBI up to an optimal inflection point, represented by a moderate level of leader honesty/humility. This finding extends previous work on moral identity in two ways: first by examining leader honesty/humility as an antecedent of follower moral identity centrality, and second by demonstrating the role of moral identity centrality as a motivational mechanism for prosocial behavior such as OCBI. This contribution is consistent with Aquino et al.'s (2009) findings that situational factors elevate individuals' moral self-schemas to make them more salient or central in the self-concept, thereby motivating prosocial behavior to gain a sense of authenticity. Results of our study suggest that leaders possessing a moderate level of honesty/humility serve as moral exemplar for subordinates whose moral identity is highly central and wish to maintain a sense of self-consistency by engaging in prosocial behavior

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that reflects moral traits modeled by the leader (Aquino et al., 2009). To the extent that honesty/humility involves presenting the self in a truthful and accurate rather than overstated way, a moderate level of this leader character strength appears to serve as a “moral prime” necessary for subordinates to maintain consistency between their highly central moral identity and prosocial behaviors that demonstrate it (Aquino et al., 2009).

Practical implications

We found that a moderate level of leaders’ honesty/humility played a critical role in predicting when subordinates become motivated to direct their OCB towards others because they wish to express their moral identity in their behavior. This finding is important for creating and sustaining ethical climates (Brown and Treviño, 2006). Therefore, based on our study, an implication for managers is to consider honesty/humility as a trait that requires carefully monitoring as to how and when it is manifested because it can influence subordinates’ motivation to emulate the authenticity reflected in the trait by expressing a salient moral identity through their OCBI. Recruiting and selecting leaders who possess a moderate level of honesty/humility, but meet minimal organizational standards for ethics and morality, and screening those who either have a deficient or an excessive level of honesty/humility may serve as the first step in producing such prosocial behavior during social interactions with subordinates.

Limitations and future research directions

A key limitation is that although our research model suggests a certain causal flow, and the pattern of results are robust, we cannot completely rule out the possibility of alternate models due to the cross-sectional nature of this study. However, because honesty/humility represents a relatively stable trait (Ashton et al., 2014) and moral identity centrality is activated by situational primes (Aquino et al., 2009), we believe this concern is allayed. Future experimental studies that manipulate honesty/humility or longitudinal studies can be

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conducted to test whether TMGT effects result in an overall pattern of curvilinearity with outcomes such as moral identity centrality and OCBI. Moreover, given that moral identity centrality appears to be influenced by situations, future studies can collect data at multiple points in time within a workweek with event studies or experience sampling procedures.

A second limitation concerns the ratings of moral identity centrality and OCBI being limited to a single subordinate for each leader. Such ratings may have produced results particular to a specific leader-follower dyad, especially if leaders provided us with a list of subordinates that would rate them most favorably. However, this concern may be allayed given the significant instantaneous indirect effect, while subordinates' socially desirable responding was controlled for, which could not have been produced if there was a serious range restriction in the ratings (Hayes and Preacher, 2010). However, future research is necessary to gather data from a broader range of subordinates and contexts to consider the variation in effects within and between leader-subordinate dyads. Finally, reliabilities for both the subordinate rating of honesty/humility and socially desirable responding measures are below the recommended cutoff. Although they are only control variables in our study, future research should further confirm our study findings with more reliable measures.

Despite these limitations, the present study contributes to the investigation of the TMGT meta-theoretical principle in the character strength context and highlights the role that subordinates' moral identity plays in motivating displays of subordinate OCBI by emulating leaders who possess a moderate level of honesty/humility. Given these contributions, future research with more rigorous methods is necessary to unfold the nature of character strengths and their resultant outcomes to determine if and when the relations are actually curvilinear and result in unexpected and undesired effects on others.

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Table 1: Means, Standard Deviations, Intercorrelations, and Alphas of Variables

Variables	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Subordinate Age	34.52	9.67								
2. Subordinate Gender	.28	.45	.00							
3. Subordinate Education	2.79	.80	.01	.02						
4. Subordinate Honesty/Humility	3.97	.55	.05	.15*	-.07	(.64)				
5. Subordinate SDR	9.21	2.40	-.06	.04	-.07	.19**	(.64)			
6. Leader Honesty/Humility	3.66	.63	-.01	.04	-.16*	.17*	.03	(.76)		
7. Moral Identity Centrality	4.50	.50	-.01	.16*	.09	.15*	.13*	.05	(.87)	
8. OCBI	4.38	.44	.06	.09	-.03	.16*	.20**	.13*	.40**	(.85)

Note. $N = 218$. Values in parentheses along the diagonal are Cronbach's alphas. Gender was coded as 0 = male and 1 = female. Education was coded as 1 = high school, 2 = partial college at least 1 year, 3 = 4-year college, and 4 = graduate degree. SDR = socially desirable responding. OCBI = organizational citizenship behavior toward individuals.

* $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$

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Table 2: Results of Regressions and Instantaneous Indirect Effects

Predictors	Model of Mediator (Moral Identity Centrality)				Model of Outcome (OCBI)	
	Step 1: Moral Identity Centrality		Step 2: Moral Identity Centrality		OCBI	
	<i>b</i>	<i>R</i> ²	<i>b</i>	<i>R</i> ² (ΔR^2)	<i>b</i>	<i>R</i> ²
Controls						
Subordinate Age	.00		.00		.00	
Subordinate Gender	.16*		.15*		.01	
Subordinate Education	.07		.06		-.02	
Subordinate honesty/humility	.10		.10		.05	
Subordinate SDR	.02		.03*		.02*	
Independent variables						
Leader honesty/humility	.03	.07*	1.24**		.07	
Leader honesty/humility-squared			-.17**	.10** (.03**)		
Mediator						
Moral identity centrality					.32**	.20**
Instantaneous indirect effect of leader honesty/humility on OCBI through subordinate moral identity centrality at different values of leader honesty/humility						
Leader honesty/humility		Instantaneous indirect effect	<i>SE</i>	95% CI		
3.04 (Mean – 1SD)		.07	.03	[.01, .13]		
3.66 (Mean)		.00	.02	[–.04, .04]		
4.29 (Mean + 1SD)		–.07	.04	[–.15, –.01]		

Note. *N* = 218. Coefficients are unstandardized; 95% CI = 95% confidence intervals with lower and upper limits; Bootstrap samples = 5,000. SDR = socially desirable responding. OCBI = organizational citizenship behavior toward individuals.

* *p* < .05, ** *p* < .01

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Figure 1: The Curvilinear Relationship between Leader Honesty/Humility and Subordinate Moral Identity Centrality

